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GARY MARTIN

Torment of tech now a home truth

BEFORE COVID-19 upended life as we knew it, we used technology to communicate at work. We sent emails and used instant messaging and, occasionally, had an online meeting.

While some of us are back in the office, other colleagues — and clients — remain stuck working from home, so technology has replaced face-to-face meetings.

Not surprisingly, a torch is being shone on some of the biggest technology pain points.

We are aggravated by a failing phone battery and rattled by multiple remote controls for the big screen in the boardroom.

Slow internet speeds irritate us, forgotten passwords plague us, email attachments that cannot be opened exasperate us and pop-up ads peeve us. Let's not dwell on the trepidation associated with the blue screen of death — or "computer interruptus".

The reality is that many of our colleagues' bad tech habits make our skin crawl. For starters, there are those wretched, newfangled hybrid-styled meetings with colleagues gathered around the office boardroom table and joined by two or three peers online. Those working from home (WFH) must yell to get noticed.

Then there is the pandemic of phubbing (phone snubbing). You are deep in conversation with a colleague, who continually glances at their phone. Suddenly it pings and they grab it.

There are also colleagues who fail to adjust the volume of their never-ending notifications, with every single alert loud enough to awaken the dead.

Another colleague responds to an email with a zillion follow-up questions, even though the email addressed all their concerns.

Let's not forget, too, the way in which the increased uptake of technology has fuelled institutionalised lying. If you can type it, you can lie about it — and often with zero accountability.

Turn your mind to the crippling CC-craziness that leaves us copied into hundreds of emails.

Or the colleague who spends hours moaning about not having the time to learn how to use new technology. They could use their grizzle time to work it out. There is also the channel hopper, who impatiently interrupts your meeting with email, text message and finally a phone call.

While technology should connect us more easily and save us some time, it only works if we are prepared to spend more of our time communicating about how best to communicate.

PROF GARY MARTIN IS A WORKPLACE EXPERT WITH THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT

THESE NUMBERS ARE GRIM READING

SO what was the alternative? That was the question thrown back at a journalist by the Finance Minister Mathias Cormann this week when he and the Treasurer released the nation's economic statement and the columns of red ink that now stretch out for decades.

Faced with a health crisis, the government's decision to close down businesses meant, in simple fairness terms, that government policy had to support all the businesses and all the jobs that had deliberately been put into a coma.

As Thursday's numbers showed, the nation's balance sheet makes for grim reading. Thanks to a collapse in tax revenue, plus wage subsidies to 3.5 million workers and the doubled dole to 1.6 million jobseekers (together that's about 40 per cent of the workforce), instead of the two modest surpluses expected last year and this, there's annual deficits of nearly \$100bn and \$200bn. And thanks to pandemic spending, gross debt that was supposed by now to have peaked below \$600bn is surging towards \$1 trillion.

Spare a thought here for Cormann, because more than anyone I suspect he found these numbers a real wrench.

After all, this is a Coalition government first elected back in 2013 to bring debt and deficits under control and while prime ministers have come and gone in that time, for seven years now he's been the sole minister in charge of the books and it's his iron determination to rein in spending that's given the Prime Minister the wherewithal to support Australians in this pandemic.

It's easy if you have a secure job and savings set aside to quibble with how much the government



PETA CREDLIN

has spent to date. But for many Australians, the past few months have seen dark times.

If you're in Victoria, Melbourne in particular, the worst of this pandemic is only hitting now.

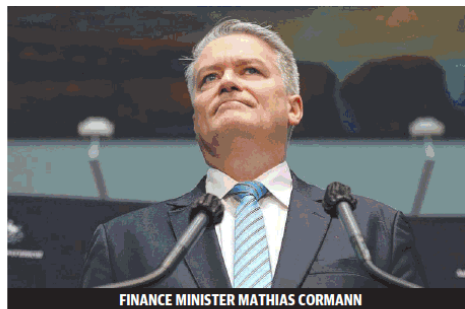
What worries me about the Commonwealth numbers last week is the assumption that Victoria will only be locked down for six weeks. Given the state delivered around 40 per cent of our nation's economic growth last year, that matters.

But with the lockdown now into its third week, and infections (and deaths) at record levels, no one believes Victoria will be back to normal anytime soon. Worse still, Victorians are losing faith that the Andrews government can even turn this around.

IN terms of taxpayer support, moves last week to restructure income payments from September acknowledge the reality that businesses trying to get back on their feet are finding it hard to get their workers back to work.

Under the original JobKeeper scheme, the "one size fits all" model, meant that two-thirds of young casuals received more to stay at home during the pandemic than they did before it began.

Thankfully that's now been fixed with payments differentiating between full-time and part-time/casual workers, and starting to taper down. Good to see too that



FINANCE MINISTER MATHIAS CORMANN

the those on the dole must start to look for work again (which was suspended at the height of the pandemic). This underscores, however modestly, the important principle that taxpayer support can't ever be money for nothing.

It's worth noting an additional two things out of these numbers.

The first, is the transparency. We are seeing far more detail from Canberra about the budget books than we are seeing from any of the states and given the skyrocketing government debt in Queensland and Victoria, that's a real worry.

The second, is the disparity between what the Commonwealth is spending on this pandemic and what levers it actually controls. It will stagger you to know that the Morrison government has spent \$289 billion on COVID-19 measures while the states have spent around \$20 billion combined. Yet as we can see with border closures and the issue of schools reopening, as well as the monumental failures in Victoria, it's state governments that actually call the shots.

The Prime Minister is a canny politician and he clearly worked

out early on that he would end up wearing the bulk of the costs of this pandemic, so set up the National Cabinet to gain the appearance of at least having some control.

But that's nothing more than a facade for him, and cover for premiers who use it when they want to and defy it when they don't. The constitutional reality is that if the crisis is international, it's the federal government in charge. But if, like this pandemic and the recent bushfires, the crisis is domestic, beyond handing over dollars the PM is all but impotent.

To amplify this point, I counted almost 20 public occasions where Scott Morrison offered ADF support to Victoria to get this current outbreak under control but each time, it was rejected. It's only now with daily infections up around 400, and pressure on the hospital system, that Daniel Andrews has relented. But how much damage has been done in that time? And what risk is there now to other states and to our economic recovery?

PETA CREDLIN IS A SUNDAY HERALD SUN COLUMNIST

Generous welfare will beat a hard day's yakka

IT'S been colloquially termed JobShirker by some wags, but Australia's love affair with COVID-19 stimulus measures is fast becoming a national addiction.

Firstly, let me be clear — the benefits of additional welfare during the fiscal pandemonium that comes with a pandemic has been good public policy.

There are many Australians and businesses that richly deserve JobKeeper and JobSeeker and for these people, it may well be the difference between going under financially and being able to survive these most difficult of times. The Coalition government's commitment to both schemes has been exemplary and in global terms may see Australia re-emerging from our economic hibernation much quicker than other countries.

However, the real danger with generous JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments is that there are some who are using it as a rort. Plain and simple.



PETER GLEESON

There are many businesses, including cafes, restaurants, bars and fresh produce farmers, who can't get people to work because they'd rather stay on the lucrative JobKeeper and JobSeeker.

Why go to work for 25 hours a week making coffees for \$450 when you can pocket \$750 for lying on the couch at home? Why go picking strawberries for 60 hours a week to earn \$800 when you can play golf every day for \$750?

Here's two examples of why COVID-19 has turned some Aussies into bludgers.

Firstly, a good friend of mine is pocketing \$1500 a fortnight on

JobKeeper, as is his wife, a recent addition to his books, while he does \$500 "cashies" on the side. He's also qualified for some \$8000 small business grant.

When told by text his \$1500 a fortnight was to be reduced from September to \$1200 — and it would continue until next March — he came back with "Happy days".

He's not alone. Take the woman at a car yard who went to her boss and asked for a redundancy so she could get JobKeeper. "I'm better off on \$1500 a fortnight because I average about \$1100 a fortnight here," she reasoned.

NSW federal MP Jason Falinski told me some people were addicted to JobKeeper and JobSeeker and it was a "major concern."

"I've got cafe and restaurant owners in my electorate who can't get people to work for them because of the lucrative nature of the COVID benefits," he said.

"That's why the second round of payments from September are

much more targeted."

The Australian Fresh Produce Alliance chief executive Michael Rogers said harvesting had been impacted by high welfare handouts.

"We expect the changes will encourage fruit pickers to take up work," he said.

Only 8 per cent of fruit pickers nationally are Australian, and "we'd like to see that improve". Here's a suggestion. There's a few big marches planned for Australian cities in the next few weeks. If anybody is arrested from those protests and are deemed to be on unemployment benefits, how about a magistrate or judge order them into buses and take them to fruit harvesting areas where they can be put to work?

If they've got time to protest, surely they've got time to pick strawberries and blueberries.

PETER GLEESON IS A SUNDAY HERALD SUN COLUMNIST peter.gleeson@news.com.au

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